



December 18<sup>th</sup>, 2008

Dan Grimm, Chair  
Basic Education Finance Task Force  
c/o Washington State Institute for Public Policy  
110 Fifth Ave. SE, Suite 214  
P.O. Box 40999  
Olympia, WA 98504-0999

Dear Mr. Grimm:

I'd like to express my personal thanks to you and the members of the Basic Education Finance Task Force (BEFTF), as well as the legislative participants and Washington State Institute for Public Policy staff for the months of persistent and comprehensive efforts to consider reform alternatives to our state's current basic education budget funding model. After 25 years and 109 previous reform study initiatives over that time, I believe the BEFTF recommendations to the Legislature are an authentic bipartisan proposal that can substantively remedy the shortcomings of our state's current budget funding model.

Considering the size and diversity our state's public school system, our proposal is inherently imperfect. However, the backbone of our proposal to integrate the State Board of Education CORE 24 curriculum structure and convert teacher compensation to a skills-and knowledge-based career ladder model is truly progressive. This new backbone provides a strong platform to significantly improve the equity of opportunity for the academic achievement of all children and much clearer accountability to state taxpayers.

Three items remain outstanding:

- 1) Maintaining the structural integrity of the BEFTF's high quality work product during the upcoming legislative session. While significant details must be worked out during the legislative process, the work product must be moved through the process as a single legislative initiative. Breaking up the recommendations into separate and partitioned bills would assure the breakdown and corruption of key reform elements that are finely balanced in the integrated and complex proposal.

- 2) Executive authority to implement the BEFTF reform recommendations must be clear and have unified support. Such an aggressive reform initiative will not be successfully implemented by the current gaggle of K-12 education administrative entities with conflicting, disconnected, vague, and sometimes competitive mandates. Definitive executive accountability is essential to success of the task force's efforts. The constitutional office of Superintendent of Public Instruction should be given broad and full action authority to organize and apply existing and new resources to fully implement the BEFTF recommendations.
- 3) Adequate funding within the budget must be allocated to align with the structure of the proposed BEFTF reforms, and the outline for phasing in the new structure must be reliably made available by the Legislature to ensure the timeline is met and to assure successful implementation. Legislative history of providing consistent resources, oversight and direction necessary to successfully implement K-12 education reform efforts over the past 25 years is, at best, bad. For example, the current biennial budget increases K-12 education funding by 15 percent over the previous budget, yet most of the K-12 education funding flaws still exist. Indeed, we are in the perverse situation of numerous school districts facing potential financial insolvency. The historical data is clear; the general assumption that increased spending is closely correlated with improvements in student academic achievement is categorically false. Equally, where increased funding is applied *with* meaningful oversight it can provide dramatic improvements in student achievement. The BEFTF recommendations significantly strengthen the probability the funding will result in greater student academic achievement for the tax dollars invested. Without a firm legislative commitment to stable funding for our proposed reforms there is little reason for parents, teachers and students to embrace them.

The BEFTF recommendations provide a unique once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for our generation to successfully reinvigorate our state's commitment to our children's future prosperity and security. Additionally, the "Great Economic Meltdown of 2008" is profoundly and unalterably changing conventional wisdom of state economic and budget priority dynamics. The cliché is "in chaos there is opportunity," but we must embrace this opportunity even if doing so means taking political risks and realizing potentially harsh, short-term, transition consequences.

Our state constitution's mandate that K-12 funding is our state's "paramount duty" is very clear and powerful. The common definition of "paramount" is "superior to all other things." The magnitude of the state's current budget deficit of \$6 billion and growing is extraordinary. As a relative baseline, to balance the state operating budget would require an across-the-board actual spending cut averaging 20 percent across all state programs. After protecting existing K-12 related education funding, the actual funding reductions across all other state programs could potentially be 30-40 percent.

The abrupt and severe consequences of such reductions on the public are jolting to even the most disinterested or cynical observers. So, the question is, how are we to fund such an ambitious and essential educational reform initiative and sustain it until completion?

Foremost, it is essential to strictly adhere to the defining characteristic that allows our representative Democracy, and its benefits, to exist at all – the rule of law. Our state constitutional mandate is that the state’s commitment to educating our children is superior to *all* other things. It is explicit that the priority of educating our children is *not* to be considered as an equal and fair share of state resources when balanced against all other possible state government commitments regardless of what they may be. Why? Because a well educated citizenry is the best firewall to minimize the dysfunctions of society, encourage limited government with low costs and empower individuals to prosper from their freedoms.

The state should enact a separate dedicated “Fund Education First” K-12 budget and fund it prior to deciding *any* other state program appropriations. This simple procedural change assures that the state budgeting process is directly aligned with our constitutional paramount duty mandate. It assures that regardless of economic or political circumstances, consideration of K-12 education policy and funding adequacy will be superior to all other things in each and every legislative session. It also provides a strong deterrent to politically “game” education funding levels to satisfy the political agenda of numerous special interest groups seeking public dollars.

The BEFTF recommendations will require additional funding on top of existing budgeted funding for K-12 education, probably about \$2 billion once the final details are settled. It has been proposed by the current governor that a new package of additional taxes be put forward to fund the BEFTF reform recommendations. I can think of no suggestion more likely to undermine such an essential reform initiative for three reasons:

- 1.) Over the last 15 years, there has been more than a 36% increase in inflation-adjusted new funding put into K-12 education, but the impact on improved student academic achievement overall is questionable;
- 2.) The consistent behavior of the Legislature to advocate for increased taxes for education and then later shifting those new revenues to other general government operations or politically favored programs encourages a deserved lack of public confidence, and;
- 3.) At a time of increasingly extraordinary financial stress for state taxpayers and growing long-term instability of the state economy, such a suggestion is callous to the real sacrifices with which taxpayers and families are already living, particularly when such sacrifices are likely to continue increasing.

As a Legislature and as a state we have come to a decision point with irreversible consequences.

We know that the competitiveness of the global economy is going to demand far more of our children and a world-class education is the only competitive advantage they will have. Yet, three quarters of our state’s children do not have the most basic proficiency for entry-level college mathematics, and even with current increased state funding, a rapidly rising number of school districts are facing potential insolvency to meet state essential learning requirement standards. These are the clear bell weathers of a failing public school system.

Will we act? Deferral of hard and unpleasant choices by the Legislature and the Governor's Office has been raised to a high art form. Unfortunately, we are at the end of the runway of the debate and deferral of critical education reforms. Continuing political sophistry serves only to make matters catastrophically worse and very literally rob our children of their future potential.

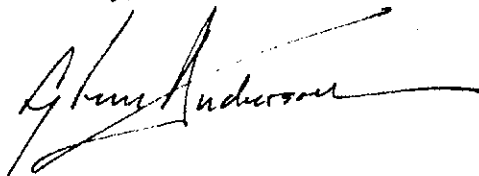
The BEFTF reforms should be funded without new increases in state taxes. All existing aggregate K-12 funding should be preserved from budget cuts, but reallocations from current purposes within education programs' spending should not be precluded. Additional new revenues to fund the implementation of the BEFTF recommendations must come from existing revenues, even after possible draconian budget cuts are made in all other state programs to balance the extraordinary state budget deficit.

The politically correct status quo response is that the budget deficit numbers are too big and the money math just can't be resolved without a tax increase. That is nonsense. That doesn't mean that a fiscally viable solution would not be very politically painful, but taking the politically easy road got us into this situation in the first place. There is no free lunch even when spending other people's money for seemingly good and necessary reasons.

After a complete assessment of the funding required to implement the BEFTF recommendations, the phased-in spending requirement should be funded with the first dollar of state revenues received according to our state constitutional "paramount duty" mandate. If additional state service programs are considered essential priorities by the Legislature and sufficient revenue is not available to fund them, then the Legislature can enact or submit to the people for a vote a new higher tax revenue package based on those issues, not K-12 education.

Our sworn oath is to honor the rule of law and abide by our constitutional mandate that K-12 education is the paramount priority of state government. Our children's future should not be held hostage for new tax revenue for a state government that has knowingly overspent at reckless rates for the past several years. Using our children's education and future prosperity as bait for new and higher tax revenues to cover bad judgment really isn't much of a legacy for the history books.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Glenn Anderson", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Glenn Anderson  
Washington State Representative  
5<sup>th</sup> Legislative District